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White Racism on the Western Urban Frontier: Dynamics of Race and Class in Dubuque, Iowa (1800 –2000)

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White Racism on the Western Urban Frontier: Dynamics of Race and Class in Dubuque, Iowa (1800–2000), by Mohammad A. Chaichian. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2006. viii, 254 pp. Tables, notes, index, bibliography. \$24.95 paper.

Reviewer Kristin Anderson-Bricker is an associate professor of history at Loras College in Dubuque, Iowa. Her research and writing have focused on civil rights organizations of the 1950s and 1960s, currently focused specifically on CORE chapters in three cities — New Orleans, Detroit, and Washington, DC.

In *White Racism on the Western Urban Frontier*, Mohammad Chaichian approaches race relations not as a moral dilemma that can be resolved by tackling racist attitudes; rather, he defines racism as “a socially created ideology” responsive to the changing political economy and “constantly modified and revised in response to political and economic developments, group and ethnic interaction dynamics and class conflicts (220).” Therefore, defeating racism requires dealing with the inter- and intra-class conflict inherent in a capitalist system. Essentially, the author argues that racist attitudes and actions characterized the culture of Dubuque from its origins, but during periods of economic distress racism becomes more blatant and aggressive. He identifies three eras—the late 1850s to early 1860s, the 1920s and the late 1980s through the early 1990s—when economic problems worsened for the working class and unemployed, and as a result they found a scapegoat in African Americans. During the 1920s, when the Protestant middle class and farmers faced a fearful transition to a corporate capitalist economy, they targeted Catholics and immigrants generally and German American Dubuquers specifically.

Chaichian presents a logical theory to explain racism in communities without a large population of non-white citizens. He wanted to understand why racial unrest occurred in Dubuque in the late 1980s and early 1990s despite its relatively low African American population rather than in Iowa cities with a larger black population such as Des Moines, Davenport, or Waterloo (57). He sees Dubuque as “any town U.S.A.” and therefore a case study to assist other communities with similar historical experiences. Dubuque’s well-intentioned, yet failed efforts to deal with its race relations provide lessons on how to deal more effectively with racism. Communities like Dubuque in Iowa, the Midwest, and the nation must deal with the economic problems that pit members of the working class and underclass against one another. Such cities need to see solutions as national rather than local, and citizens need to understand that “specific historical circumstances” explain what ethnic group becomes the targeted scapegoat (201).

Although *White Racism on the Western Urban Frontier* provides a compelling explanation for racism and interesting insights to assist contemporary discourse on race relations, its primary thesis remains a theory rather than a conclusive historical argument. A professor of sociology at Mount Mercy College, Chaichian employs history and historical sources, but the monograph does not follow the methodology employed for community studies in the historical discipline. The author provides evidence, yet several key conclusions are based on a limited number of sources. The people in the study are categorized in large groups such as liberals, business community, movers and shakers, union leaders, working class, religious institutions, and local politicians. Therefore, the characteristics, backgrounds, and value sets of these people as individuals and as a group are missing. Although Chaichian uses a broad range of sources, he relies most heavily on secondary literature and published primary sources in the form of reports and newspapers. Such reports and newspapers are valuable primary resources, but they reflect comments crafted for public consumption. How might private diaries, personal letters, organizational papers, the minutes of city council meetings, or telephone logs enhance his argument? The author references interviews in the text, but he does not provide a complete list of the interviewees and the unpublished sources he used. More troubling, he sometimes applies conclusions from the historical discourse without providing Dubuque-specific evidence. In order to argue that the Ku Klux Klan attracted area farmers because of their fear of capitalism in transition, evidence from local sources needs to verify that conclusion. Although it is logical to assume that real estate agencies discriminated against African Americans because historians have documented such actions across America, evidence of that action in Dubuque must be supplied. Finally, several sections of the text would be enhanced by applying context from other historical work to Dubuque and determining whether local sources confirm that interpretation. For example, one explanation for the racist spike of the late 1850s/early 1860s might derive from the nineteenth-century working-class ideology of "free labor" and the free soil political ideology used in the sectionalist debates surrounding the Civil War.

These criticisms arise from this reader's expectation to discover a community study rooted in the historical discipline, but are not meant to imply that *White Racism on the Western Urban Frontier* should not be consulted. On the contrary, the book is a thoughtful commentary on contemporary race relations that provides food for thought for the many communities engaged in a discourse over race.